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Coming to Terms: Plagiarism

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# Kum' in tōō Turmz COMING TO TERMS

## Plagiarism

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**Plagiarism** is perhaps one of the foremost and richest of post-modern dilemmas. It reveals convictions and controversies about authorship and ethics, obliging us to closely examine assumptions about the stuff of composition studies: the nature of the self, the nature of texts and their production, and the nature of language. The theoretical movements toward social conceptions of language and self have contributed to the increased use of collaboration in composition classrooms and the proliferation of modern writing centers.

But social views of language use come up against a very Western notion of individualism and proprietary interest in textual—both oral and written “texts”—production. The traditional Western view of language connects authorship with ownership. George Dillon (1988) explains:

In a commonsense view, actual words of discourse are either mine, or someone else's, and possession in this case is grounded in having selected, ordered, and uttered the words in some sort of public event (a speech or interview or press conference) or in some written document that can be cited and checked by others. (63)

If we own what we utter, this has important bearings on who we are, both professionally and personally.

Most writing instructors—and frequently professional writers—have had to deal with **plagiarism** at one time or another. By some accounts, **plagiarism** is on the rise.

Alice Drum (1986) calls **plagiarism** “a disease that plagues college students everywhere” (241); it is a pervasive and pernicious sickness that students must be cured of, presumably by the teacher. Augustus M. Kolich (1983) refers to it as the “worm of reason,” commenting that “[t]he mere hint that a student may have cribbed an essay transforms us from caring, sympathetic teachers into single-minded guardians of honor and truth—roles that saints and presidents seem better suited to play” (142). Richard Murphy (1990) calls it “the cheating disorder” (898) and explores a case in which he accused a student of taking her paper from several popular women's magazines (although he could not find the source). After pressuring her into admitting that her paper was not her own, he discovered that he had bullied her into admitting to a crime she did not commit; the student's essay, about a very personal experience with anorexia, was indeed her own. While for many teachers, unintentional **plagiarism** can be resolved through explanation and instruction about textual conventions (see for example, Elaine Whitaker 1993), for others, both unintentional and intentional **plagiarism** embroils teachers and theorists into a heated and emotional conflict of values.

## ORIGIN OF THE TERM

Kolich points out that the word **plagiarism** comes from *plagiarius*, the Latin for *a person who owns slaves* and was first used by the Roman poet Martial who claimed that another poet, Fidentinus, had passed off Martial's poems as his own and, hence, had stolen the “servants of his imagination” (143).

But Martial is not particularly concerned, confident that, because Fidentinus is only a second-rate poet, he will soon prove himself a fool “for trying to enslave those [words] who serve the mind of a master” (Kolich 143).

Writing students, of course, are not masters of the discourse they are trying to learn. The sense of violation that English instructors feel when students plagiarize far outweighs Martial's happy conviction that Fidentinus can't benefit from his thieving ways because of his lack of talent and expertise. Kolich points out that when students use the work of someone else and call it their own—particularly when they *buy* term papers or turn in articles cribbed from *Time* magazine—they display disrespect for the teacher and the academic institution (144); they breach a code of behavior relating to conventions of academic integrity (145); and they disregard the doctrine of original thinking to which our culture subscribes (145).

## CONCEPTS OF AUTHORSHIP

Susan McLeod (1992) attempts to chart some of the conflicts and connections between values and conventions:

As academics, we are so familiar with these conventions [of acknowledging sources] that we may forget how strange they actually are. The very notion of being able to “own” words or ideas is after all a relatively recent one. Classical notions of art involved mimesis, or imitation: originality was not valued, nor was the individual artist; writers borrowed freely from one another. . . . It is perhaps not by accident that our mod-

ern notion of plagiarism was born at about the same time as two other ideas: the romantic notion of the single, original author expressing his innermost feelings through art, and the capitalist notion of private property. Ideas, words, and phrases are now (in what is surely a curious phrase) "intellectual property," to be trespassed upon only with permission of the owner. (12)

McLeod also points out the particularly Western conception of authorship that makes it possible to steal language. Other cultures (for example, Middle Eastern, Asian, African) cannot own ideas or words; language *belongs* to all. McLeod suggests that as our student populations become more diverse, the problem will cease to be a simple case of cheating but a far more complex conflict of epistemologies, values, and cultures. She cites Mike Rose's student Marita (in *Lives on the Boundary*), a hard-working student from the Los Angeles inner city, who lacks the cultural understanding and grasp of academic conventions that might have enabled her to avoid charges of **plagiarism** on one of her college papers (Rose 1989, 179–180).

Concepts of individual authorship inevitably affect how much help can be given to students, especially in writing centers whose primary work involves writers helping other writers, predominantly through some form of collaboration. Irene Clark (1988) laments that our concepts of **plagiarism** restrict the ways tutors can work with students. She cites training programs in which tutors receive a number of admonitions designed to avoid giving students any unfair advantage: never write any part of the paper, "not even one phrase"; never point out grammar, spelling, or punctuation mistakes; never hold the pens or pencils (7). The problem with these injunctions, Clark asserts, is that they deter tutors from giving help where it

is most needed, early in a writer's development:

If we in writing centers were not so paranoid about charges of plagiarism, we would be more likely to avail ourselves of the pedagogical advantages of imitation. Thinking in terms of [Vygotsky's] "zone of proximal development," tutors might find it useful to "show" a student how to develop examples, correct an awkward sentence, maybe rephrase something, even help a student with a few spelling corrections. (8–9)

Teacher, tutor, and student fears of transgressing a particular code of ethics actually prevent them from working together effectively on writing and error correction, both mechanical and global.

Of course, students are not the only guilty parties. As one of Elaine Whitaker's (1993) students points out in an assignment on **plagiarism**, teachers (and scholars) do it, too. In fact, theft of intellectual property occasionally makes national headlines (for example, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bruno Bettelheim, Stephen B. Oates). Computer programs have been devised that can pinpoint word and sentence patterns in both professional and student writing and compare them with existing texts to apprehend plagiarists, turning scholars and teachers into language police, a role most neither relish nor have time for (see **Note**).

### CONFLICTS ON PLAGIARISM

From the professional literature on both **plagiarism** and collaboration, it appears that scholars and teachers in English studies remain conflicted. On the one hand, **plagiarism** is a nasty, venal, and immoral crime that needs to be eradicated while, on the other, **plagiarism** cannot be a problem—sharing and borrowing is inherent in the nature of language. Especially in a culture where classrooms are increasingly

diverse, both teachers and scholars apparently need to address more fully the value systems that make **plagiarism** a crime. Given the entrenchment of value systems, **plagiarism** will undoubtedly remain a topic about which we (and our students) remain confused, combative, and litigious.

Of particular interest to those interested in exploring the shift in assumptions about language and its impact on concepts of intellectual property is Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede's *Singular Texts/Plural Authors* (1990). Lunsford and Ede offer a summary of the concept of intellectual property, a short history of **plagiarism** and its status in a post-modern paradigm, and a detailed exploration of the consequences for collaboration. For a more traditional viewpoint, Thomas Mallon's *Stolen Words: Forays into the Origins and Ravages of Plagiarism* (1989) provides a historical survey of interesting cases of **plagiarism** in both literature and film.

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#### Note

See Paul Gray's article in *Time* for a discussion of a computer program developed by National Institutes of Health scientists, Walter Stewart and Ned Feder. For student writing, Glatt Plagiarizing Services (P.O. Box 162033, Sacramento, CA 95816) has developed the Glatt Plagiarism Screening software that "is a valid and sensitive measure of successfully discriminating plagiarists from non-plagiarists."

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